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Corps has no preferred alternative; public hearings set for May 4-5 on MassDOT's South Coast Rail proposal

CONCORD, Mass. – The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, New England District, will hold public hearings May 4-5, 2011 on the Massachusetts Department of Transportation's South Coast Rail proposal to establish passenger rail service between Boston and the cities of New Bedford and Fall River, Mass.

As a regulatory agency, the Corps of Engineers does not have a preferred alternative. The project proponent, the Massachusetts Department of Transportation (MassDOT), is seeking a Corps of Engineers permit under Section 404 of the Clean Water Act to discharge fill material in U.S. waters, including wetlands, incidental to establishment of passenger rail service between Boston and New Bedford and Fall River. Because the proposal constitutes a potential significant environmental impact a Federal Environmental Impact Statement (EIS), an in-depth and multi-agency environmental study, is required by the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA).

The Corps released its Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) on the Mass DOT's South Coast Rail proposal on March 23, 2011 and will take comments from the public on the proposal through May 27, 2011. The Draft EIS also has been prepared to serve as a Draft Environmental Impact Report (DEIR) to satisfy the requirements of the Massachusetts Environmental Policy Act (MEPA). The state MEPA review is being conducted simultaneously with the federal NEPA process. The joint EIS/EIR evaluated a range of alternative transportation routes. Alternative routes evaluated in detail included three principal rail routes and one bus route: 1) the "Attleboro Alternative," (2) the "Stoughton Alternative," (3) the "Whittenton Alternative," and (4) the "Rapid Bus Alternative." A No Build/Transportation Surface Management alternative was also evaluated. Additional permutations, including a "Middleborough Rail – Rapid Bus Hybrid" and an "Attleboro Fourth Track" configuration, were also examined.

The Draft EIS is intended to provide information needed for the Corps to perform a public interest review for the Section 404 permit decision. Key issues analyzed in depth in the Draft EIS include: impacts to waters of the United States (including vernal pools and other wetlands); transportation; land use; socioeconomics; environmental justice; visual effects; noise; vibration; cultural resources; air quality; open space; farmland; hazardous materials; biodiversity; threatened and endangered species; and water resources.

In order to properly evaluate the proposal, the Corps is seeking public comments on the Draft EIS. The public will have until May 27, 2011 to submit comments on the Draft EIS to the Corps. Recognizing that this is a large document, the Corps provided a 65-day public comment period, almost three weeks longer than normal, to allow the public additional time to submit their comments on the Draft EIS. The Corps of

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Corps to hold public hearings on Mass DOT's South Coast Rail proposal/2-2-2-2

Engineers appreciate the flexibility of the MEPA office to extend their normal 30-day comment period to allow for the state and federal agencies to better coordinate their reviews of this proposal and provide the public additional time to review and comment on this extensive document.

Public hearings, to provide an additional opportunity to comment on the proposal, will be held on Wednesday May 4, 2011 at 7 p.m. in the Qualters Middle School at 240 East Street in Mansfield, Mass., and on Thursday, May 5, 2011 at 7 p.m. in the Keith Middle School at 225 Hathaway Boulevard in New Bedford, Mass. Registration will open at 6 p.m. The Draft EIS has been provided for review at 24 local libraries (listed in the public notice), which can be found on the Corps of Engineers website at:

<http://www.nae.usace.army.mil/projects/ma/SouthCoastRail/southcoastrail.htm>

The project impacts to waters of the U.S. would range in area from approximately 10.3 acres to approximately 21.5 acres, depending on the alternative selected.

As a regulatory agency, the Corps does not have a preferred alternative. Evaluation of impacts of the various alternatives will include application of the guidelines of Section 404(b) of the Clean Water Act. As part of this step, the Final EIS will evaluate the range of transportation alternatives to determine the Least Environmentally Damaging Practicable Alternative (LEDPA). The alternatives analysis will be working toward the determination of the LEDPA. The DEIS is a draft document released for public comment and the Corps will consider such comments before identifying the LEDPA in the Final EIS.

The timeline for the Final EIS is uncertain and will depend upon issues raised during the DEIS review, and additional data that may be needed to evaluate those issues. The Corps cannot speculate about the timing of the Final EIS until after the comment period is complete and additional data needs are identified.

The Corps public notice, with more detailed information on the proposed project, can be reviewed online at the Corps website <http://www.nae.usace.army.mil>. Select Regulatory/Permitting and then weekly public notices and search by file number or state.

Public comments on the Corps of Engineers Draft EIS (File # NAE-2007-00698) should be forwarded no later than May 27, 2011 to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, New England District, Regulatory Division (ATTN: Alan Anacheke-Nasemann), 696 Virginia Road, Concord, MA 01742-2751 or by email to: SCREIS@usace.army.mil. Additional information is available from Permit Project Manager Alan Anacheke-Nasemann at 978-318-8214 or toll free 800-343-4789 or 800-362-4367 (if calling from within Massachusetts) or by email to: SCREIS@usace.army.mil.

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